

Statement of Senator Judd Gregg
School Choice for District of Columbia Students
September 30, 2003

I thank the Chair. I want to return to the underlying bill, a bill that has been debated for 4 or 5 days. Regrettably, I was not able to be here.

Returning to the underlying issue, which is the District of Columbia appropriations bill, and specifically the language in that bill which created new dollars at the request of the Mayor and the president of the school board and members of the school council to fund three basic programs, one is school improvement, the second is charter schools, and the third is a choice program which would involve not only public but also private schools within the city. Unfortunately, I was not here for all the debate, but it is important to talk about who is being impacted.

Who is this debate really about? The District of Columbia has a very large school system. Unfortunately, it is one that has some very fundamental problems. Those problems have created an atmosphere where, regrettably, a large number of children cannot get a decent education. In fact, this picture highlights it. Statistics show that 47 out of 100 children are being sent to failure by being required to go through the entire public school system in Washington, DC.

Essentially, the public school system in Washington spends a huge amount of money, but regrettably it doesn't educate kids very well. Seventy-five percent of the fourth graders in this city are reading below basic reading levels. Only 11 percent of the eighth graders in this city are proficient in math. That is 1 in 10, actually. Only 10 percent of the eighth graders in this city are proficient in reading. One in ten children in this city can actually read at the level at which they should be. And 42 percent--a staggering number--drop out of school in Washington. Over one-third of the District residents read below the third grade level.

Yet this school system spends \$11,000 per child--\$11,000 per child--for these results: 42 percent of the kids are dropping out of school, 1 in 10 children are not reading at the levels their peers read at across the country in the eighth grade, and almost 1 in 10 are not able to do math. That means if you go into the DC school system, you have at least a 50-percent chance of either, A, not coming out of the system or, B, if you come out, you are not going to be able to participate in the American dream.

A fundamental element of participating in the American dream, being successful, having a decent income, raising a family, owning a home, having a great job, is your ability to read, write, and do basic mathematics. So we are talking about kids being left behind.

Let me just point to a couple specific children. These are children who, without private school, would not have had the opportunity to succeed.

How did they get into private school if there is no private school choice program in the District of Columbia ? There is something called the Washington Scholarship Fund which is a program that has been set up because they recognized that Washington schools were working so poorly, and they have a lottery system. If you are a low-income child in Washington, your parents can put you into this lottery system. If your name is drawn, you get a choice--basically the same program that we are proposing to fund with this bill. But that waiting list is so large that your chance of being picked--in other words, winning that lottery as a child in Washington--is only 1 in 10. For every child who gets chosen, 10 don't.

I want to read a couple of notes from two people who were chosen, who were unfortunately locked into the public school system, and their parents knew they were going to fail. Their parents knew if they stayed in the public school system as presently structured, they were going to be lost souls, lost as citizens of our country, productive citizens, because they were not going to be able to gain the skills they needed.

This is the first person I want to read about. This is a note from this young girl in the photo, Lapria Johnson. She writes: "The Washington School Scholarship Foundation is the only way I can read."

That is the group that has the lottery.

"I am 8 years old. I have a lot of problems I was born with. Public schools said I would not read."

This is Lapria writing: "I read and my math is great. My handwriting is not so good, but I have an A in reading and an A in math."

She has had her hope restored as a result of having the opportunity of choice.

There is another group that I want to make a note of in the photo right behind me. This is Kevin and Kevona. That is who these two children are here in the photo. This is Mrs. Wilma Roberts writing, and these are her husband's niece and nephew. She is writing and saying: "We wanted them to have a chance to advance to greater heights. Kevin was put into special education, and all he needed was help with his speech. He was put in a school that did not help with speech or his emotional growth. The Washington Scholarship Fund has been a godsend for these and other children who have the potential to do good things with their lives. "

Doesn't that really say it all? "The potential to do good things with their lives." Yet 47 out of every 100 kids who go into the Washington school system--their capacity to do good things with their lives is dramatically undermined by the fact that the school system they are in simply isn't working very well.

How do we react to this? How do we make sure the Laprias, the Kevins, and Kevonas of this city have a shot at a lifestyle that you and I would want our children to have?

Well, the Mayor is concerned about it, and the head of the school board is concerned about it.

They are concerned enough that they were willing to take an extremely imaginative and creative and, politically, a very aggressive and dangerous step, from the standpoint of their political futures. They were willing to propose to the Congress, which has a unique responsibility for the District of Columbia, that if we would give them some extra money for their educational system, they would take that money and set up three very creative programs.

The first program would be a school improvement program. The second would be a program to help with the creation of charter schools, which they already have a significant number of in this city. The third would be a private school choice program patterned basically on the Washington Scholarship Fund Program that these three children have had a chance to take advantage of.

Why would the Mayor and the head of the school board and a number of the council members of this city who are responsible to their citizenry be willing to make that sort of a step? It is because they believe it will work for these kids. It is because they believe these kids should have a shot at the American dream by having the skills they need to succeed, by having the ability to do math and writing and reading at a level that is competitive with their peers across the country. They recognize that not every child learns the same.

There are some schools that are going to help a Lapria or a Kevin, who is coded incorrectly for special education, it appears from that statement. Some of those schools are not publicly managed so they can help these kids. But they are there and they are in the private sector.

The opportunity should be given to these children to participate in those schools that are going to give them the skills they need. And so the Mayor, the head of the school board, and a number of city council members have come forward and asked for the funding proposal that is in this bill, and the subcommittee is chaired by the Senator from Ohio, Mr. DeWine. You would think it would be almost a no-brainer that if we as a Congress, who do not manage the city of the District of Columbia but who by the nature of the Constitution have responsibility for it, are approached by the political leadership, which is taking this sort of a creative and imaginative step, that we would say, OK, that is an idea that you want to try, and we will do what we can to assist you.

The majority does take that position but, unfortunately, there is a working minority on the other side of the aisle that does not believe these kids should have a chance, that does not believe the Mayor and the head of the school board should run their school system, that believes the 7,500 children who are low-income children, who are on a list today for private school choice, should have no opportunity to fulfill their dream; that they should have to go every year to this gathering where 1 in 10 of those kids gets their name pulled out of the hat and the other 9 children are sent home in tears and their parents, in most instances--by the way, they are children of single moms. They obviously have a father, but the mother is managing the family.

In most instances, what we have is a mother who realizes that her child, who she is raising by herself--she is working gosh knows how many hours a week to do it--is not going to have a chance to succeed and get out of the cycle of poverty and dislocation she sees, because of the nature of her financial situation or the nature of her situation generally, without a better chance in education. It is usually that single mother who puts her child on that list.

The majority of those 7,500 children are children who have a single parent at home taking care of them and trying to raise them in very tough and challenging times. We have to admire those parents immensely. But those 7,500 kids are being assigned to failure by my colleagues across the aisle.

I suppose one could argue--and obviously my colleagues across the aisle do--this is not right; that public schools should get all the money; that there should not be any competition between public and private schools; and that choice just simply should not be allowed; that we as the Federal Government should not be making that type of decision. One can make that argument in theory, but one cannot make it as it applies to the District of Columbia because we are responsible for the District of Columbia, and the leadership of the District of Columbia has come to us and said they want this program.

Basically, they are saying no vote on this language; they are not allowing us to proceed to a vote. They are filibustering this proposal because they do not have the votes to defeat it. When our Democratic colleagues run a filibuster from across the aisle, they are essentially saying they can run the city of Washington better than the Mayor can run it, better than the city council can run it, better than the president of the school board can run it, and these kids who are on this waiting list--and there would be a lot more, I suspect, if this program were to go forward--are just casualties of the politics of the Senate. Tough luck. Forty Senators on the other side of the aisle are saying to 7,500 kids: Tough luck, we have a good life in the Senate. You have no life, no chance to participate in the American dream. You certainly have no chance to become a Senator because we are going to consign you to a school system which, as far as your parents are concerned, because they made the choice to put you on the list to opt for choice, cannot take care of your need to learn and is not going to give you the capacity to be successful.

It is an incredibly cynical act that is being pursued in the Senate by a minority when this appropriations bill is being filibustered on this point.

One has to admire, though, the leadership of this city because the Mayor has been incredibly aggressive in making this case. There has been no halfway commitment. This has not been a marginal undertaking on his part. He has been calling Members. He has been making the case. And the city has tried what they can try. They have tried public school choice in this city. To some degree it has worked. In some instances, there are just not enough functioning, strong schools to allow those kids who are locked in schools that do not do very well the opportunity to make that choice.

This city has tried charter schools. In fact, probably the fastest growing part of the school system is the fact they are setting up charter schools throughout the city. Thus, we have parents pulling together to try to create entities that will work a little better.

What they are asking for is one more very important tool. There are a lot of private schools in this city. There are a lot of religious private schools, Catholic especially. There are a lot of nonreligious schools that are very good schools. Some of them are focused on unique talent development and some are general in their educational approach. What the Mayor is saying is

let's bring those schools into our mix as we try to give our children a better shot at being successful at learning what they need to know.

Remember, this program is not going to be for the wealthy or even the middle income. The way this program is structured is you have to be in an extremely low-income category before you can qualify for these choice opportunities. In fact, the priority goes directly toward low-income kids in schools that have already been designated as failing. We do not limit it to that, but that is where the priority is. I suspect that will absorb completely the available slots. So it is an attempt to get at the people who are most in need in the schools that are being least responsive.

Yet the majority of Democratic Senators on the other side of the aisle say: No, no, the kids are not going to be given that chance. The kids are going to be forced to stay in these schools which have such horrific track records. It really is a startling level of arrogance and an incredible indifference to these children.

What drives it? What drives this attitude? Is it a belief that we can improve the schools by putting more money into them? If we just put more money into public schools in Washington, we can solve this problem? We know that is not the case because in the last 3 years, we have increased funding in the public schools in Washington by I think 39 percent, and we have increased overall funding even more radically over the last 8 years in the public schools in Washington. Their success rate has not improved at all. In fact, they continue to fall behind.

As I said, they spend \$11,000 per pupil in this city--\$11,000 per pupil. There isn't a school district in the State of New Hampshire that spends \$11,000 per pupil, I don't think. The only other school district in the country which is even near Washington in spending is New York City on a per-pupil basis. So it is not an issue of let's take this extra money and put it in the public school system and that will solve the problem. That can't be where they are coming from, but that is actually one of their arguments. But it is a straw dog because it doesn't stand up to any test of factual review.

Is it because they think these kids should just be left behind; that they are simply willing to say 47 out of every 100 kids in this city we can discard; we can say they can't have the ability to pursue their dreams? I doubt that. I don't think anybody on the other side of the aisle is so cynical. But that is the practical effect of the indifference to the problem and their unwillingness to address it in a creative way such as the Mayor has suggested.

Or is it there is force coming at them that is a special-interest force known as big labor that is saying: This is the camel's nose under the tent. If the city of Washington pursues a choice program, will choice spread across the country? We know the leadership of the national unions is adamantly opposed to any form of giving children choice in our school systems.

That may be it. There has to be some reason, but it certainly is not their interest in the welfare of the children that causes them to reach this conclusion that they are going to filibuster this opportunity for these children that is requested by the Mayor, by the president of the City Council, and by the parents of those 7,500 kids who are sitting on that list and are running out of

time.

Remember, these kids are being put through and pushed through the system. Every year we fail to give them adequate reading skills, adequate math skills, is another year they probably cannot recover. If a child goes from the third grade to the fourth grade and they cannot yet read at the third grade level, how are they going to read at the fourth grade level?

Every year that we do not allow the city of Washington to pursue for their children options which may bring them up to speed, we lose another large segment of children, 42 percent dropping out of the school system. It is the parents and the kids who are being left behind today, who are being filibustered today, who are being strong-armed by the minority today, and it is an act of crassness that is going to come back in the way of lost lives. Fortunately, not Lapria or Kevin or his sister but individuals such as these other children are going to end up without any hope because this Senate, and specifically the minority in this Senate, has decided that they know more about the school needs of these kids than the Mayor, than the president of the school board, the members of the City Council but, most importantly the parents of these children who have been willing to go make the effort and take the extra initiative of trying to get their kids the type of education to give them the skills they need to live in our country.

In my opinion, it is an incredibly cynical act that is occurring today, as I have mentioned, and I regret it. I hope Members on the other side of the aisle will get up, walk over to the mirror in their office, and look in that mirror and say: Why am I doing this to these kids? At least as to the city of Washington, they ought to have the courage to stand up and say it is right to give the city this opportunity.

I yield the floor.